Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact
Juniper Forest Site Improvements
EAOR135-EA-01-012

DECISION:
It is my decision to implement Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) for recreational improvements in the Juniper Forest and Wilderness Area. The improvements are: fence two western juniper trees to exclude livestock, install one wildlife guzzlers, replace one wildlife guzzler, install two artificial burrows, and to sign OHV trails within the Juniper Forest ACEC.

Rationale: These improvements would provide sources of water for wildlife, expand burrowing owl nesting habitat, protect raptor nesting habitat, and identify designated OHV access through the ACEC. Important resource values would be adequately protected during implementation of the projects. No adverse impacts are identified for the grazing allotment and other potential uses of the area.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Considering the limited extent and impacts of the proposed projects, along with the project design features, as described in the attached environmental assessment to protect sensitive resources, it is my determination that the Proposed Action (Alternative 1) does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment (a finding of no significant impact). Therefore, this action does not require preparation of an environmental impact statement.

/s/ K. R. Devitt 12/19/01
Kevin R. Devitt Date
Field Manager, Border Resource Area

Juniper Forest/Juniper Dunes Improvements
EAOR135-EA-01-12
Border Resource Area, Spokane District

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes recreation and wildlife improvements at its Juniper Forest/Juniper Dunes Area, located 15 miles northeast of Pasco, Washington in the southeastern part of the state (see Map). This area is in Franklin County, within the Juniper Forest Management Area of the Border Resource Area, Spokane BLM District.

Background

The BLM acquired 19,860 acres of land in the Juniper Forest/Juniper Dunes Area. Since that acquisition, recreational use has steadily increased. Summer temperatures can reach well over 100^{N}F. and can plummet to near zero degrees or below in the winter. Because of these temperatures, Spring and Fall seasons are the highest recreational use times for the area. Public access into this area is based on permission of adjacent private landowners. There is currently no legal public access.

The off-highway vehicle (OHV) use in this area consists of 3,920 acres open to OHV use, 8,620 acres limited to designated roads and trails (Area of Critical Environmental Concern or ACEC), and 7,140 acres permanently closed (Juniper Dunes Wilderness).

Purpose and Need for Proposed Action

In its present condition, the area has limited water available for wildlife. Burrowing owl nesting habitat is limited within an active area. The health of two western juniper trees that serve as nesting habitat for raptors (including the ferruginous hawk) is being impacted, possibly by livestock grazing. During the hot summer months, cattle congregate beneath the shade of the junipers. Juniper roots have become exposed, and soil has blown away from beneath these trees. OHV trails within the ACEC are not signed. Due to lack of informational signing within the ACEC, the OHV users are creating new trails in areas considered sensitive wildlife habitat.

The proposed action addresses needs to provide sources of water for wildlife, expand burrowing owl nesting habitat, protect raptor nesting habitat, and identify designated OHV access through the ACEC.

Description of the Alternatives

Two alternatives were considered: Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) and Alternative 2 (No Action). A description of each alternative is provided below.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action): The proposed action is to fence two western juniper trees to exclude livestock, install one wildlife guzzler, replace one wildlife guzzler, construct two artificial

burrows, and to sign OHV trails within the Juniper Forest ACEC. These projects would be completed with the help of local OHV groups, boy scouts, and the Backcountry Horsemen. The projects would be implemented with BLM safety standards and minimal impact to the soils and vegetation.

Rectangular fence exclosures, about 100 feet per side, would be built around two juniper trees. The fences would be of 4-wire, high tensile design. The bottom wire will be no lower than 16 inches and the top wire will be no more than 42 inches to allow ingress and egress by deer and other wildlife.

A wildlife guzzler would be placed in the Wilderness Area along the south border. During a fire in 1996, a wildlife guzzler in west part of Wilderness Area was destroyed. This guzzler would be replaced. Both guzzlers would provide sources of water for wildlife. Two artificial burrows would be placed to expand existing nesting habitat for burrowing owls.

The burrows, fences, and guzzlers would be installed with hand digging tools. In addition, an archaeologist will monitor the excavation for the guzzlers and burrows.

Steel fence posts will be driven into the ground, but wooden brace posts would be dug by hand. Some soil displacement and vegetative disturbance is expected during these activities, but is not expected to degrade any sensitive resources in the area.

To inform OHV users what trails they can ride on, fiberglass posts, labeled with "DESIGNATED TRAIL" stickers, would be placed along the OHV-designated trails within the ACEC.

Appropriate resource inventories (including cultural, botanical and wildlife) will be conducted prior to implementing specific projects. If historically significant resources are identified or located, the project would be redesigned to reduce or eliminate impacts to those resources and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) and affected Tribes would be notified. If historically significant cultural properties cannot be avoided, consultation would be conducted with the OAHP, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Yakama Indian Nation, and in some cases the Advisory Council of Historic Preservation. If cultural materials are inadvertently discovered during implementation of the project work in the area of these materials will be stopped and the District Archaeologist, OAHP, and affected tribes will be notified.

Botanical inventory for this species would be conducted in the project area during its flowering season (late April/early May). If gray cryptantha populations are located, the guzzlers and/or artificial burrows will be relocated to avoid those populations. Similarly, designated trails would be routed to avoid any gray cryptantha populations.

Alternative 2 (No Action): Under the No Action Alternative, the site would remain in its current condition. No guzzlers, fences, or artificial burrows would be installed and there would be no signs placed along designated OHV trails.

Affected Environment and Environmental Impacts

Soils

The predominant soil within the Juniper Forest/Juniper Dunes Area is Quincy loamy fine sand, 0 to 15 percent slopes. This soil is very deep and somewhat excessively drained. Quincy soil has rapid permeability, low water-holding capacity, slow runoff, slight water erosion hazard, and high wind erosion hazard. The effective rooting depth of this soil is 60 inches or more.

Impacts from Alternative 1: Soil disturbance or displacement would be minimal with no significant effects to other resource values.

Impacts from Alternative 2: Soil disturbance would occur at its present level as affected by land uses and climatic events.

Invasive Non-Native Species (Noxious Weeds)

Noxious weed species found in the vicinity of the proposed project area include rush skeletonweed, diffuse knapweed, and Scotch thistle.

Impacts from Alternative 1: Soil/surface disturbances could contribute to the spread of noxious weeds if disturbance occurred where noxious weeds are present, especially rush skeletonweed.

Impacts from Alternative 2: Noxious weeds would continue to spread through wind blown seed. Noxious weeds would further spread if OHV uses were not restricted to designated trails.

Water Resources

There are no surface waters within the proposed project area.

Vegetation

The majority of the vegetation in the project area is early seral (heavy cover of cheatgrass, with gray rabbitbrush and green rabbitbrush the most common shrubs). Late-seral plants, such as bluebunch wheatgrass, Sandberg's bluegrass, and bitterbrush, occur in scattered patches. Big sagebrush is common, and charred stumps of this species indicate a history of fire. There are also areas of blowouts and dunes that support yellow wild rye, Indian ricegrass, lance-leaf scurfpea, and showy dock. Juniper trees in the project area occur as isolated individuals. Because of the sandy substrate, low rainfall and ongoing movement of sand by wind action, development of soil horizons is slow or absent.

Impacts from Alternative 1: Early-seral plant species, such as cheatgrass, would invade and cover the soil under the western juniper trees. The tree roots would be protected from further soil loss by

exclusion of livestock impacts. As a result, juniper trees would be less likely to die or blow over in a strong wind event.

Signing designated trails would reduce the potential for development of new trails through existing vegetation, and allow vegetation to start filling in non-designated trails.

Impacts from Alternative 2: The juniper tree roots would be exposed to further soil loss due to livestock impacts, making them more likely to die or blow over in a strong wind event.

New trails would continue to be created by OHV users, and use of existing non-designated trails would continue, resulting in continued disturbance of vegetation and a likely decrease in the amount of late-seral vegetation within the project area.

Wildlife

The Juniper Forest area provides habitat for a wide array of wildlife species for part or all of their life cycle. The burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, and long-billed curlew nest within the area. Other important species that can be found in the area include the short-horned lizard, rattlesnake, mule deer, golden eagle, prairie falcon and other upland game bird species. The burrowing owl (State Species of Concern) is in decline throughout most of its range, including the state of Washington.

Impacts from Alternative 1: The artificial nest burrows would decrease the opportunity for predation of burrowing owl by badger and coyote, and also increase the likelihood for burrowing owls to have juvenile nest success.

Providing water sources within the area would allow big game, amphibians, reptiles and birds to utilize the area during times when alternate water sources are not available. These water sources would also allow better dispersal and movement of wildlife throughout the area and decrease the likelihood for predation at any one water source.

Signing trails should concentrate recreation use to designated routes, minimizing the impacts to wildlife by reducing the chance for off-road degradation of wildlife habitat and loss of nesting areas during the spring. Many wildlife species will habituate over time to recreation use that is restricted to constant disturbance zones.

Impacts from Alternative 2: Species use and distribution within the area would be limited to existing watering habitat under this alternative.

Not signing the designated trails/roads would result in continued off-road use within the ACEC. This off-road use would increase disturbance to wildlife and potentially damage important nesting areas.

Special Status Species

One Bureau Assessment and Washington state sensitive plant species (gray cryptantha, *Cryptantha leucophaea*) occurs within the Juniper Dunes Wilderness Area and may occur within the ACEC.

Impacts from Alternative 1: Trail signing would direct users onto designated routes, restricting the potential for vehicular impact to those trails, as well as to gray cryptantha.

Impacts from Alternative 2: Lack of trail signing would encourage the continued use of unauthorized trails and creation of additional new trails, increasing the likelihood for damaging gray cryptantha plants.

Recreation

Existing improvements include a parking area and two information kiosks (see Map). Primary recreation uses in this area are OHV use, horseback riding, hiking, and hunting. Other uses include wildlife and wildflower watching. The popularity of the area is steadily increasing. In 1999 and 2000, about 8,500 people visited the Juniper Forest Area, according to BLM visitor use numbers.

Impacts from Alternative 1: Impacts resulting from the proposed action are expected to be minimal. Disturbance to the ACEC would be limited to placing fiberglass posts along designated trails. The signing would help prevent visitors from getting lost and from inadvertently trespassing onto adjacent private land. The proposed installation sited for the wildlife guzzlers and artificial burrows is outside of the primary recreation OHV use area and would not conflict with dispersed recreational use.

These improvements will direct OHV users to stay on designated trails and enhance wildlife viewing opportunities.

Impacts from Alternative 2: Under this No Action Alternative, the trails through the ACEC would not be signed. OHV users could continue to create new trails through sensitive wildlife habitat.

Cultural and Paleontological Resources

The Juniper Dunes are relatively recent landforms, consisting in part of active dunes with sediments being redeposited by the wind. Although the area has not been examined for paleontological material and the probability for occurrence of pre-Pleistocene fossils is small due to the age of the landforms, there is a possibility of Pleistocene faunal fossils. Due to their continued activity, the dunes are a low probability area for the occurrence of cultural resources but consulting tribes have expressed concern about the possible occurrence of cultural material here. Although none of the affected areas were previously surveyed for cultural resources, the areas immediately around the two trees proposed for fencing were surveyed in June of 2001. A BLM level III pedestrian survey was conducted for the project area. No historically significant cultural material was found. A similar survey will be conducted in the areas proposed for installation of the guzzlers and owl burrows prior to installation. If cultural resources are found in these locations the project will be redesigned to avoid them. The management direction to stop work and notify the District Archaeologist, OAHP, and affected tribes would minimize potential for impact to significant cultural resources.

Impacts from Alternative 1: Grazing-related disturbance under the juniper trees would be eliminated by fencing, reducing the probability of deeper disturbance due to blow downs. Although increased soil disturbance may occur around the fence lines, cultural resources inventory has not identified historically significant cultural properties or significant paleontological resources in the proposed areas of fencing. Placement of trail designation signs could reduce OHV use outside signed trails, thereby reducing erosion that could expose sub-surface cultural material.

Placement of wildlife guzzlers is not expected to have an effect on historically significant cultural resources. Installation of the owl burrows could disturb previously undiscovered subsurface cultural material.

The project design features for protecting cultural resource values, if they are found during project implementation, would minimize any potential for damage.

Impacts from Alternative 2: No change in effects from current situation.

Other Resource Values

Grazing Use: Grazing allotments number 00535 and 00536 are within the general project area. Allotment 00536 is currently in nonuse status, and is not being grazed. The two juniper trees and associated guzzlers are located within the active allotment number 00535. Although juniper trees are important to the physical health of the cattle during the hot summer months, many juniper trees would remain nearby on both BLM and interspersed private lands to provide thermal cover for the cattle. Therefore, cattle health and production would not be affected. The amount of cattle forage being excluded by the juniper exclosures is tiny compared to the total allotment, and cattle stocking rates and cattle performance would not be affected.

Environmental Justice: There would be no disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations as a result of implementing the Proposed Action (Alternative 1).

Critical Elements That Were Considered:

- Air quality
- Wild and scenic rivers N/A
- Prime/unique farmlands
- Floodplain
- Threatened and endangered species
- Wastes (Hazardous or Solid)
- Special area designations (including Areas of Critical Environmental Concern)
- Wilderness
- Invasive non-native species

Air quality would not be affected, and none of the other elements listed above occur on the allotment.

Cumulative Impacts

Impacts from Alternative 1: The proposed improvements could result in higher OHV use along designated trails.

Impacts from Alternative 2: Anticipated higher OHV use by recreationists off designated trails within the ACEC in the future could disturb sensitive wildlife habitat.

Coordination with Other Agencies, Groups and Individuals

Barb Benner, Botanist, Border Resource Area - BLM
Rich Bailey, District Archaeologist, Spokane District - BLM
Madilane Perry, Archaeologist, Spokane District - BLM
Kathy Helm, District Planner & Environmental Coordinator, Spokane District - BLM
Richard McComas, Natural Resource Specialist, Border Resource Area - BLM
Robert Troiano, District Weed Specialist, Spokane District - BLM
Joyce L. Whitney, Wildlife Biologist, Border Resource Area - BLM

Consultation

Consultation on the Juniper tree enclosure fences was initiated by a letter dated March 5th, 2001 and accompanying maps. This letter included information on a number of small projects in BLM administered lands in four eastern Washington counties. Copies with accompanying maps were sent to The Couer D'Alene, Nez Perce, and Spokane Indian Tribes; Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation; Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation; Yakama Indian Nation; Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation; historical societies of Ferry, Grant, and Lincoln counties; and the Franklin County Historical Museum.

Further consultation was initiated with the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Yakama Indian Nation by letters dated September 5, 2001.